



*Migrant, Zapata Canyon, Libertad Neighborhood, Tijuana, 1987.*

## Elsa Medina

### Photography, Accumulated Knowledge

José Antonio Rodríguez\*

Sitting in the middle of her studio amidst dozens of shelves with hundreds of negatives waiting to be classified, Elsa Medina, a contemporary photographer we can learn a great deal from, talks about the knowledge photography represents.

Medina has long lent her creative abilities to making images, both in photojournalism and as a free-lance documentary photographer. She is a professional with a singular portfolio and also a teacher who has given

workshops in different places, teaching others how to make images. This may not be as simple as it seems, because regardless of technical questions, photography involves a much more complex kind of knowledge, with what we could call profoundly personal, perhaps philosophical, implications.

So, when dealing with a creative person like her, we have to ask how she educates, how she teaches young people to make photographs. This has several meanings because we believe that the way someone transmits knowledge about photography speaks to what they are like as a creator; and also, when the image comes to be considered a true work of art, the photo-

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\* Historian specialized in photography.

Photos courtesy of Elsa Medina.

graph says a great deal about its author as a human being and as a creative person. Evidently, to know a photographer, we need to know how he or she thinks. And her answer is, "What I try to communicate to them is that what we are seeing is part of what we are. . . . It also has to do with the degree of awareness we have about something."

It should not be forgotten that for Elsa Medina, it has been crucial to have been the student of Nacho López, a great Mexican educator and photographer. And also that, to understand photography, at one time she delved into philosophy. She adds, "Whatever one believes just is. We all conceive of the world and value things because we need to be able to hold on to things to be able to live. These are the beliefs we carry along with us. Some are ancient; others have to do with the times we live in, with education, with our social class: everything that your personal imaginary or your beliefs

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create. Your point of view is determined by your background. What I teach them, what I try to communicate to them is that we are beings conditioned by the historic moment, that we are filled with prejudices, that we have atavistic ideas. Photography is a tool for knowledge. If you are aware that you belong to a world, then you have the ability to question everything."

Elsa Medina began to make a name for herself in Mexican photography because of the work she did from 1986 to 1999 for the daily paper *La Jornada*. And it is no coincidence that several of those images have become emblematic in the history of contemporary Mexican photojournalism. In fact, besides being published originally in the paper, they have been picked to illustrate the covers of historic books like John Mraz's *La mirada inquieta, Nuevo fotoperiodismo mexicano: 1976-1996* (The Unquiet Gaze: New Mexican Photojournalism [1976-1996]) and Olivier Debroise's *Mexican Suite. A*



*Hare Seen from Mexico, San Diego-Tijuana Friendship Park, 2007.*



*Flip-Flops on Tijuana Beaches, Next to the Border, 2007.*



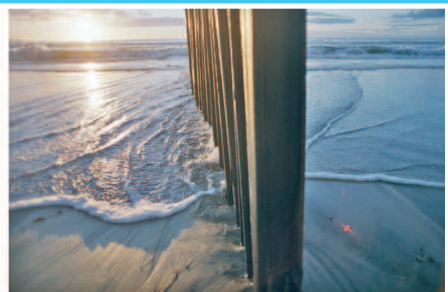
*Missile Launched from Vandenburg Air Force Base, California, Seen from Mexico, 1997.*



*Little Bird Walking Tijuana Streets, 2007.*



*Discarded Stuffed Toy on Ciudad Juárez Street, 2003.*



*Border Fence between Mexico and the United States, 2007.*





Everyday Life-Windshield Cleaner, Mexico City, 1989.

*History of Photography in Mexico.* Photos like the one of a jam-packed Mexico City subway detailing anxious hands clinging onto a tube or the one of a migrant in the Zapata Canyon desert are images that speak to unstable circumstances, to despair.

These examples say a great deal about Elsa Medina's career, since she is part of a generation that practiced a new form of photojournalism. Historian Mraz mentions it in his book, writing that the new Mexican photojournalism originated in a complex, multi-faceted process, although its beginnings are intimately linked to the first signs of the end of the "official" journalism that dominated Mexican society and culture from 1940 on.<sup>1</sup> And, in effect: the years that Medina was at *La Jornada* are precisely the times of grave national economic crises, profound social changes (the years that so-called civil society emerged, from the 1985 earthquake to the appearance of the Zapatista National Liberation Army [EZLN] in the mountains of southeastern Mexico in 1994), when

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critical photojournalism had to become the full image of what was going on in the country.

That is when the new genre, gestated from the end of the 1970s and appearing first in the *Unomásuno* daily, offered up the gloomy face of life in the cities and the countryside. That is, they showed daily existence using images that became fully symbolic of our fragility; what Medina calls a "synthesis" of it. But, Medina's work contains an exception to the rule: the image that was published on the front page Wednesday, March 29, 1995, of a young man bathing nude in a public fountain, photographed from behind. In the heat of March, it was a surprising, playful image—many women readers called it sensual—because it was taken in the street, despite the fact that at that time we were going through yet another economic crisis in Mexico.

But Elsa Medina had to abandon the craft of photojournalism to channel a profoundly more personal



Mariana, Tijuana, 2005.



Hurricane Gilbert, Cancún, 1989.

vision. “The camera gives you the perfect excuse for being in the middle of what’s happening,” she told journalist Angélica Abelleira. “All those years were a huge responsibility because your craft turns you into the newspaper’s eyes, something we’re not always aware of. Of course, I lived through a great time in journalism, but I think that now newspapers aren’t as concerned about safeguarding each photographer’s personal vision. There are better professionals than there are media outlets to publish in.”<sup>2</sup> That is where we can pinpoint her decision to move away from the daily assignments at the newspapers, to move away from the craft that, while fascinating, does not leave much room for personal projects.

However, we should not forget that the newspaper trade gave Medina a humanist vision, a legacy that to a great extent comes from her time as a disciple of Nacho López. Her time as correspondent in Tijuana (1997-1999), a place that through her lens seems to be the sum of all our fears and despair, allowed readers of *La Jornada* to understand

Her time as correspondent in Tijuana showed readers that Mexico is a country of migrants seeking hope.

better that Mexico is a country of migrants seeking hope. Through her critical gaze, the border desert revealed itself as a land populated only by the abandoned.

Something —or a great deal— has changed since Medina began to spend her time on personal projects: in her daily wanderings, a process of creation has taken shape based on a new kind of making documentaries with photographs. For example, those polyp-tyches that she makes of her friends or loved ones, like multiple paintings of customs, micro-stories of affection and the times divorced from spectacle, that recreate warm moments. Or, the landscapes of Tijuana that, in their luminosity, either subtly or openly have borne witness to nature and the beings that inhabit it, putting to one side the prophecy associated with those who wander through deserts accompanied only by the photographer. The sea and the sky are now a permanent presence in her images. Quiet seas of metallic luminosity, impetuous, never threatening (*El mar y sus orillas*, or *The Sea and Its Shores*); the sky

# ELSA MEDINA



*Everyday Life*, Three Poles Lagoon, Acapulco, 1993.



*Everyday Life-A Fixed Game*, Mexico City, 1996.

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at sundown, with imposing clouds—closely akin to the abstract forms of Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalents*—withering or as luminous as they are infinite. Without a doubt, landscapes that now recreate a peaceful gaze.<sup>3</sup> Images without turbulence, without unease. And then there are also the objects left randomly behind, the animals that populate her pictures (cats, dogs, parrots), all the fauna that speak of a full existence together. Given this, it would seem that Medina has returned from many experiences, that she has managed to observe in many ways and narrate her stories in sequences of images in her own way. All together, they create a chain of sensations, which also reveals that she has been capable of looking at the essence of things, and achieved a wisdom in which what others see as fleeting or is imperceptible to them takes on a new dimension within the image.

But, how is this achieved? “You nourish yourself,” says Medina, “with everything that has gone before... it’s

cumulative knowledge. I read that in the book *Vida y muerte de la imagen* [Life and Death of the Image]. Using the photograph, we learn to see another way.” This is a change that, in the case of our photographer, there is no longer any way to reverse, because it is there in her images: an entire life that accumulates until it overflows. **MM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Mraz, *La mirada inquieta, nuevo fotoperiodismo mexicano: 1976-1996* (Mexico City: Centro de la Imagen, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Angélica Abelleira, *La Jornada* (Mexico City), July 20, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The author is referring here to Alfred Stieglitz (Hoboken, New Jersey, 1864-New York, 1946) who sought photographic “equivalents” to express his vision of life. These images, photographs of clouds without any reference point, taken as simple motifs or the play of light and shadow, are part of his 1931 book *Equivalents*. [Editor’s Note.]